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RECENT PROGRESS IN HISTORICAL WORK.

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(Read before the Society, November 11, 1907.)

Last year there were listed 720 books of history and biography published in this country. In addition to these were perhaps over another hundred volumes both large and small appearing from the historical organizations of all kinds. Besides, numerous magazine articles, pamphlets and other fugitive productions, poured from the press. Nearly all of this enormous development has come within a third of a century after the revival of historical interest in our land, largely stimulated by the action of educational institutions.

When we consider the nature of the enormous mass of printed historical material in existence it naturally divides itself into three heads, first, generalizations, or popular treatment of history, second, original sources, third, what is ordinarily called scientific history, given in the chronological order of their development as near as possible as the great authors who appeal to what might be known as the general reader first came into prominence in this field. Beginning with ancient writers, notably Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, we pass through a gallery of giants who have wielded the greatest influence of all pens that bear upon the past. Almost any person of the least education can check off the names of Robertson, Hume, Gibbon, Macaulay, Carlyle, Bancroft, Rhodes, and others of their class. These emphasize the power of form in their utterances and speak to the ear of what is latterly called the man of the street who hardly ever gets beyond these in his reading.

They rise to the level of literature while at the same time seeking to draw lessons for human guidance from the path behind us.

All of these authors go back to original sources, but it is only of comparatively recent period that stress has been laid upon the importance of this branch in the way of dressing this primary data up in type. Of course the ancient nations did very little of this, still less could political units do for history during the gloom and disorder of the middle ages. In fact nothing of moment has been undertaken in this direction by any governments until within the century or half century past. Very properly and very logically the most of these endeavors have been limited to this foundation material in the shape of official documents and papers gathered from the public archives, set in type as near like the original as the exigencies of the art will allow. A few years ago through the aid of our diplomatic service a very comprehensive summary of the work done by many European countries was made by one of our leading historical workers to-day. From this we see that England, Germany, France, Holland, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Austria, Turkey, Russia, Canada, each officially recognize the value of the subject and sometimes expend sums going up as high as a quarter to half a million dollars annually. To this list we may add Japan, which has been for several years engaged in issuing historical material for that ancient monarchy running up to hundreds of volumes of a thousand pages each or roughly speaking more than a million printed pages. The enormous cost of the records of our Civil War still pouring forth from the government press are patent to all, reaching the remarkable total of three million dollars in round numbers.

Our states have also entered energetically upon the

same task, appropriating very liberally for gathering manuscripts, forming libraries and publishing. The State of Wisconsin is one of the finest examples, as the legislature is very liberal in extending aid.

Subsidiary to these public agencies are the historical societies of which there are roundly two hundred and twenty-five, nearly all having been born within the past third of a century. The oldest is the Massachusetts Historical Society, beginning in 1791. In the aggregate it has been estimated by very competent historians that they amount in means to three or four million dollars, counting plant, collections, and endowments, with an annual income from all fountains of half a million. It may not be a wild guess that the literary output annually is a hundred volumes of four hundred octavo pages each.

There is a steady drift among all of them towards absorption or assistance by the commonwealth. The most striking instance is the one in Wisconsin deriving a public support of over thirty thousand dollars every twelve months. Nearly three quarters of our states walk the same road though not abreast of this leader. The national society though getting no direct assistance from the treasury is vastly benefited by connection with the building on capitol hill. As a contrast to these quasi-public bodies may be mentioned two of entirely private character that are splendid examples of what can be done in that way. The richest of all is the famous Massachusetts Historical Society with an income of fifty thousand dollars from endowment. In striking juxtaposition to this is the Virginia one which for years has issued a quarterly of first class excellence upon annual fees and sales, aggregating over four thousand dollars.

Not all by any means of the two hundred and twenty-

five already mentioned publish regularly; some only at intervals and many practically not at all. But the most progressive and capable among them appear in an annual volume or in a periodical, usually quarterly. Owing to postoffice regulations and to the custom outside of history the periodical vehicle is becoming popular among these societies rather than the annual. In another respect there seems to be a gradual development among them all, they all incline more and more markedly to the strict field of original sources. One of the leaders it that one in Richmond which scarcely deals with anything except public documents preserved from colonial days and turned over to them as the custodian. But as the state administrations begin more and more to publish their own archives, there is less room for this kind of work. More attention is consequently paid to such other fundamental material as reminiscences, diaries, letters, and first hand studies and descriptions by men who are practically a repository in themselves.

There is the rapid multiplication of the state-aided historical agencies. In fact, perhaps half of our commonwealths in some form or other support a historical bureau. This assistance is to be observed among the oldest and the youngest of these local governments. New York devotes considerable funds yearly and a long series of large volumes has been the result. Not only her neighbors but her sisters beyond the Appalachian Mountains, across the Mississippi Valley, and on the other side of the Rockies along the Pacific coast are indulging the same kind of generosity. Among the most active in the way of publishing may be mentioned Kansas and Missouri. As has already been said there is considerable uniformity in the general aims of these public and quasi-public institutions. It is very grati-

fyng to note that the work of the Columbia Historical Society is fully abreast of the general level of all of these that have the backing of the people's treasury. A review of all of our volumes will show that we are following the same high-road that they do, that we have the recollections of men whose memories reach far back into the past, that we have the reproductions of early life among us, that we have high class biographies, and pictures of dramatic events behind us, and stories of historical land-marks—that in a word purely through the spontaneous coöperation and labor of those interested in the subject we are doing at our own expense, work that puts us in the front rank with these institutions that have the public purse to draw from. In numerous instances, those bureaus began just as we did through voluntary combination, gradually evolving from that until they became recipients of the bounty of the organized population. It was fitting, proper, and a necessary step in providing the body of citizens with exact knowledge that this should be done at their expense. As we have paralleled them thus far in our progress why should we not take this additional step and get help from the beneficence of the government? Certainly there is no other spot in this whole land with richer traditions, with more interesting associations, with more philosophical or picturesque elements behind them. But in all movements of this sort the man for the post is the most important factor. Among those that have been selected in guiding this institution from the earliest years onward there must be someone specially adapted for this delicate and important task.

The third section of the historical sphere is the latest cultivated and the most exuberant in its growth, unfortunately mis-called scientific history.

Briefly, this means the huge task of attempting to teach history by the scientific method which has been gradually evolved through the centuries. The essence of scientific training is accuracy, first of observation, second of statement, third of verification—all of this to be done with the personal bias absolutely eliminated, only the cold intellect to be involved in this pursuit. It seems a mere truism that we should shut out our feelings when it comes to investigating such a prosaic thing as a collection of stone, but it has been a desperate struggle on the part of investigators into nature to winnow from their minds all traces of emotion. The scientist at the start was far more priest than philosopher or experimentalist. As the range of his vision widened and the depth of his insight increased he reacted from this humanistic atmosphere to the other extreme in which he tried to represent himself as purely a mental machine for seeing, classifying, and tabulating. The magnificent results of this coldly critical attitude were almost boundless and it was an unconquerable consequence that the other departments of learning should be touched and vivified. For a time the historian shrank from this new method, so different from his own. Here on the one hand is the man dealing with a lifeless, inert mass of material. On the other hand is the sane person considering the conduct of other beings just like himself. In the two cases the subject that does the thinking is the same but the objects on which they think are eternally and inherently different in every molecule. The historian cannot experiment, or segregate any portion so that he can observe more minutely the remainder, but there is one thing fixed, the record. A document, a letter, a diary, a coin, a relic of any kind, is an evidence of a fact, it may not be a true representa-

tion in all cases but generally it comes nearer than anything else a man is capable of. Hence, the historian attached himself to the original source as the foundation stone for this new faith. Secondly, as a corollary, comes exactness of statement either as an abstract or as a quotation, with unfailing recognition of the authority that he is using. So far he can claim to be as impartial as any man with balance or crucible or glass. But when he essays the third stage, that of interpretation, then the difficulty arises of reducing himself to an automaton with brain. He has sought to avoid this obstacle by either exhibiting the other sides of any disputed question, and they are myriad in history, or by fairly recognizing another standpoint.

Armed with the triune conceptions, of going to the original sources, of accurately citing and acknowledging his authority, and of subordinating self, as far as possible, letting the facts tell their own story, success was instantaneous and students were soon gathering. A paradise was opened for industrious mediocrity. There is no other branch of knowledge in which the plodder can so unerringly and unmistakably turn out work that ranks him alone with the average of his fellows. Anyone with fingers to grasp a pen, with eyes to see the letters of the alphabet, with the usual modicum of brains, and with claws for scratching in the mold of the past, and with a nose for rooting in the accumulations of the centuries can become a scientific historian of the first rank. Neither special gifts nor unusual powers are necessary nor do exceptional talents avail for putting him in the van so long as he confines himself within the limits of his training. Steady toiling, ceaseless digging and scratching, painful raking, careful and systematical piling up the few

crumbs that he comes across, this is the chosen road that will lead to the goal as that term is understood by the school. He can retire to the dusky dells of the past and busy himself in the catacomb of the generations that have gone before, picking and labeling, far removed from the turmoil and strife of life around him, undistracted by the confusion of interests about him, unharrassed by doubts as to the right side to range himself upon in the questions of to-day, a medieval monk withdrawing into a cave in the distant forest far from his fellows.

Theses and monographs soon began to come from the press in torrential currents, rising higher and higher as the years go on. It would be tiresome to count up the number of pages poured forth yearly, and utterly useless except as a statistical trick, but a fair judgment would put it up into the thousands annually.

It is legitimate for any person to ask the value of all this travail, especially one who has burrowed in the field himself. As to form it can be disposed of in a few words. The one distinguishing and inevitable mark of scientific history thus far is dullness, deep, dense, supreme, unrelieved by glimpse of nature or spark of life. As to its essence it may be said in the first place that the scientific school has vastly overestimated its importance. Generally they look with a kind of pity upon Gibbon, Macaulay and Bancroft as not having had the advantages of scientific history. Their attitude is pretty well represented by the story of how a professor of history in one of our large universities disposed of poor Gibbon with a snort of contempt when someone brought up the Roman historian in conversation. "Oh," said the scientist, "poor Gibbon! I always feel sorry for him he did not know how to use his sources." But when we get a little

perspective on their own path so far from at all competing with Gibbon, with a few exceptions not a single product from the school in the last third of a century has made a ripple among intelligent people of more than a few inches in diameter. Only two or three pens out of the several hundreds of these advanced students of history can touch and interest the general reader. Some have ground out large volumes with almost no readers and of the scores of monographs we cannot be sure that more than two people ever read one of them, the proofreader and the author himself. It reminds one of the strenuosity of boys who go out into the woods and select a tall tree and hew away at it until it comes crashing down to the earth. As it topples with a mighty roar, they raise shouts of triumph and then wend their way homewards leaving the birds to recover from their fright and the solemn stillness to brood over the green masses again, nothing having been accomplished except the glory of felling the forest monarch and the exhilaration of hearing a loud noise.

In the second place the school is confused and aimless as a body, not knowing exactly "where they are at," still less where they want to go, and least of all being sure how to get there. There is a boundless sea around and each has been putting out in his little coracle, very often only turning round and round, but battling all the time, with no point ahead visible, and in many cases the fog shutting off the shore from which he embarked. One has but to glance over the list of titles for dissertations in our prominent centers to see how widely different are the conceptions of what should constitute a thesis for the doctorate. From a study of Benedict Arnold's character up to the disputed election of 1876, from the history of the town

hall up to the limitations upon the president's prerogatives, from a groping after the sources that a popular novelist uses for a piece of historical fiction up to the study of our colonial finances—these are some of the mild extremes to be seen. Some are as far from scientific conception as theosophic poetry, some are almost as rigid as a demonstration in Euclid. Some require delving for several years among musty records, deciphering of cramped handwriting even with the aid of the microscope, the marshaling of an infinity of facts collated from a thousand repositories, others are mere rehashes and condensations of one or two volumes. One of our leading universities stamped as original contribution to knowledge a biography boiled down from a thousand pages to three hundred, similar to a compression of the life of Buchanan, say, into a fraction of its present length.

But what else is to be expected when so many of the instructors are so uncertain? Occasionally one of them in a formal paper lets fly shafts of satire at the general run of theses, but when asked for specific illustrations, he allows himself to go no further than the safe oracular deliverance that some of them are not as good as they might be, but are better than others, and others are not as good as some. In fact the whole school seems a lot of students, all tremendously active in a fog bank, each nervously spading and shoveling in a little circle, anxiously peering about as he goes round and round, looking like so many dim ghosts faintly outlined in the gray vagueness.

This uncertainty extends into the class room. In some of our best institutions the methods of instruction vary as widely even for the freshman class as the examples of topics just given. At meetings of the national Historical Association of late years there are

confessional conferences in which professors from different institutions frankly state the plans that they had adopted. These range from the study of the textbook to the making of a technical bibliography, the latter seeming monstrous to thrust down the throats of raw first year men. Not only do they disagree in method but they are wide apart in the fields covered. Some take ancient history, some medieval, some English, and even some American, as the first pasture for the beginners. But nearly all unite on one conception, an unconscious one we can charitably believe, that the real true purpose of the school course in history is to make a scientific historian out of every student, even the girls!! Heaven save us!!

Thirdly, their sense of proportion and selection seems atrophied. They are so serious to gather up all of the crumbs and fragments that they overlook the main dish. A fact is a fact to them and the greater quantity of them they can rake in the larger the volume and the nearer approach to truth they think. But life is not on a level. Events and deeds are not coördinative but subordinative and cumulative. Men proceed in a succession of heights and hollows, and to reproduce existence there must be summits and ascents and descents in the groupings of data. A million bald statements are no more truth than a jumble of figure blocks is arithmetic. It is impossible to get all the facts and even if possible they would no more revive by-gone days than the skillful stringing together of bones into a skeleton makes a human being.

But there is a bright side in contrast with this darkness.

First, the scientific school gives good mental discipline. It is almost the clear training that the lawyer

gets, in fact the preparation for the two departments is almost the same. The practitioner has to deal with evidence to-day, the historian with evidence yesterday. In consequence he learns to reject all hearsay testimony and to rely upon known contemporary authorities which he has to cross-examine, to weigh, to compare and finally to analyze.

In the second place the school teaches accuracy of statement which necessarily demands the most unwearied search after every scrap of proof that could throw light upon the topic.

In the third place all of this training is preparation for something higher. This is one of the deplorable limitations of the scientific school that it stops with this preliminary forging of the implement and does not proceed to put it to service, but the great historians would have been much improved by something of this intellectual discipline.

Some of the French and German defenders of the school have urged that the chief value of the whole course is the gathering and shaping of raw material for the use of the master of style. John Fiske has frankly acknowledged his obligation to the granaries of monographs, and Wilson shows his consultation of them in his brilliant history of the United States but these eagles of rhetoric gathered only bits here and there from them. It seems a sad waste of muscle and nerve to grind out thousands of pages of which only a few paragraphs will ever be transmitted to the great bulk that all historians must bear in mind.

Nevertheless there may be a future yet for this school. The foundations certainly have been laid for developing men of character who ought to be able to wield some influence in their localities if they continue

to grow but not unless they do. With their regard for the cold facts as the sub-stratum, with their anxiety for correctness of representation, with their habits of research, they are fitted to rear on these which are the mere mud-sills a structure that ought to be something of an inspiration and a help to their fellowmen. So far however, there are no signs of this flowering. A few years ago, within a stone's throw of this hall, at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, the president, one of our most vigorous historians, boldly called upon his brethren to throw off the garments of timorous conservatism and try to come into the current of daily life and to enter into the field of politics. He specifically advised that the Association at least every presidential year hold a meeting early in the campaign to discuss the national issues and candidates from the standpoint of the historian. He might just as well have invited the gentle inmates of an old Ladies' Home to go out and ride bucking bronchos.

Incidentally, we can mention those two departments so nearly allied to history, bibliography and genealogy. The first is so liable to be overdone that it can easily become the most useless rubbish heap in all the universe. The last is a drag-net enveloping those who care for nothing more than to spend their moments in trying to finger back the spider filaments of their pedigrees, painfully, anxiously frantically spending hours, days, months, and years in trying to bridge over some gap. We all know them, the men with the inward fire of devotion to their task and the women even bursting into tears if they cannot find a hook some hundred years back to attach themselves to. We in Washington know the exuberance of these family tree

climbers as annually our ears are rent with the chatter, the shrieks and screams—but I forbear from motives of safety and prudence.

But underlying deep down in the intellectual field, below all these shadows and groupings, the popularizer, the original record, the monograph, is the legitimate query what is it all worth? When we neatly pile up the thousand volumes of last year and over and around these place the twenty-odd thousand of the preceding thirty-two years, all in a beautiful pyramid and walk around it and view it from varying angles the interrogation arises whether it is one of Thomas Carlyle's monumental dust heaps to lie there neglected, moldering into an impalpable powder finally to disappear in the fathomless past.

Right at the threshold we are met with a favorite dispute among philosophers and historians of to-day, namely, is history a science? Names can be marshaled on both sides, including him who is now at the apex of American history-writing, James F. Rhodes, who declares that the avocation which he has followed for from twelve to fifteen years is not to be classed with the valuable sciences such as physics and chemistry. On the other hand, when we see the sturdiness and the systematizing habits of Samuel Rawson Gardiner, who did such great work in the Cromwellian era, we are a little slow about condemning it. The supremest test of science is the power of prediction but not all branches have that gift. But all the sciences deal with nature, inert matter, the results of certain environment over which man has absolutely no control. The humanistic branches on the other hand study and dissect human nature, and while in the bulk men have been affected by the elements above, around, and be-

neath them, we have to allow for the individual influence working within the natural limits. Hence in no strict sense of the word science can history be so described. There is no science of the living and there can be none of the dead. The word is a very convenient one for connoting comprehensive effort at arranging a vast number of facts and stringing them upon a few cords of cause or continuity and results.

Of course in these mountains of typographical dross and trash there are pockets of solid ore and nuggets of gold. In this regiment or so of workers there are a few who can select a topic of worth and can treat it both scientifically and entertainingly, making a real contribution to knowledge that at the same time attracts the reader. Such as these gather facts, methodize tangled statements, reconcile contradictions, state results and reach conclusions that must be of undoubted helpfulness not only to the great generalizer when he is seeking for material but also for any man of intelligence who may read these productions. They are to be found in every historical association and as much so in ours as anywhere. We have in our previous volumes such investigations into the first years of our institution as newspapers, theatres, churches, banks, libraries, hotels, and government. In our last we have an especially fine example detailing the very first traces of local government in the District of Columbia. Allied to that is an important series of biographies on the mayors of Washington.

But whether we take one horn or the other of this dilemma the value of intellectual toil at bottom rests upon the amount it may contribute to the comfort and happiness and development of mankind. History can warn against the repetition of mistakes and the swal-

lowing of exploded errors. It perhaps has saved us from recanonizing rejected heresies. At least platform, speech and editorial are debtors to the past on both sides of every political issue among us for arguments and illustrations. These myriads of appeals to the voter must have some weight in his decision, and if so, history is worth all the herculean labor put on it, as it is the man of the mass that is the final decider of our course. History should also allay feeling and smooth animosities and it is stoutly claimed that the subsidence of the passions of our civil war is due to study of the past. Not all the prejudice by any means has disappeared and sometimes it is fiercer and more imperishable among the historians than anyone else—the teachers and writers in each section. It might fail however in all these respects and still be of the greatest benefit, if it helps to well-balanced lives, preparing men to take what fate may bring upon them. And is not just this the real kernel of historical study, that it gives culture which is another name for broad sympathetic character? Is not history more allied to literature than to science, though it is that rare subject that stands in between the two? Does it not elevate the outlook and extend the horizon, teaching that many things which afflict to-day or astonish men are as old almost as the race? This very knowledge should give courage for meeting new difficulties, should strengthen the judgment for new problems, should fortify under disaster, and should temper exaltation in the hour of victory.

In this work of forming character, of broadening and deepening convictions, all forms of historical activity take part. The most profound one, of course, is the source on which all comments and conclusions must be based. It is perhaps for this reason that the govern-

ments devote their strength to this line more than to any other and that historical societies are all tending in the same direction. Allied to this, what might be called the mud-sills on these granite foundations, should rest those laborious productions of scientific history, but whether they do contribute much towards the growth of the fabric above is open to question. But at any rate those delvers are only mere miners in banks of clay, makers of rough, unlovely bricks utterly useless in themselves and unserviceable except when placed by the hand of the architect in the walls above. It may be only a hodful taken for this beneficent purpose but it is a consolation to have contributed even that atom to the general purpose. However, in any case, the transcribers and producers of the primary data and the editors that give the transcript proper setting and the monographer who goes through scores of these garnering what he thinks the few grains of wheat, all of these insignificant and unheralded workers, while doing something for the mass of their fellows do infinitely more for themselves if they perform these humble tasks in the right spirit. They will get a certain amount of culture, they will widen their range of vision and they will acquire an appreciativeness that will make them more fitted to influence their fellows. But all of these can expect slim recognition and still scantier compensation, commonly none at all. Publishers in fact will hardly touch history without a guarantee of the cost for issuing it. The prince of American historians humorously remarked that he had been working at a rate of five cents a day for ten or fifteen years.

It is to his comrades, about half a dozen now living in this country, and to their predecessors and their successors that all of the artisans in the under world of history must look for the final fruiting of their en-

deavors. It is the subtle skill inhering in style that reaches the heart of the average man. Beyond rhetorical periods he never gets and it is he in this land that decides our policies and shapes our destinies through his choice of our captains. So far from the new school of historical writers shoving aside these men of comment and expression, they are stronger, more useful, more indispensable than ever and it is this small class that comes out of this third of a century of enlargement and of growth more triumphantly than ever.